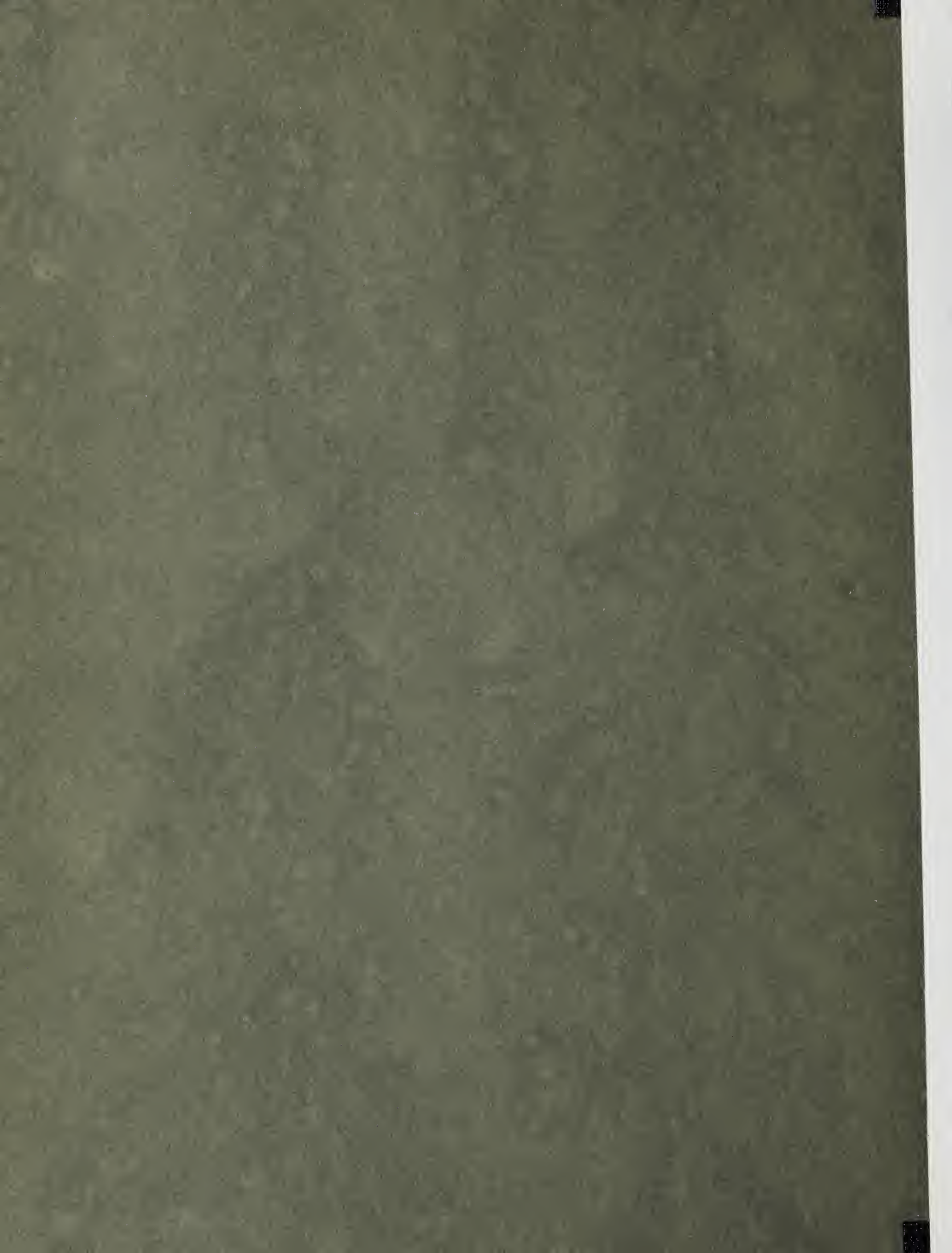


A PROPOSAL FOR A TACTILE MUSEUM
OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOVERY

David Hammond and Marcus Weisen

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A PROPOSAL FOR A TACTILE MUSEUM
OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOVERY

DAVID HAMMOND & MARCUS WEISEN

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"Extraordinary! Sensual!! A treat for the sighted as well. I learned things through the tactile experience that I'd never seen with my eyes! Thank you so much for making this beautiful experience possible."

Extract from the British Museum "Please Touch" Exhibition
visitors book. London. 11th March 1986.

Tutored by:

Byron Mikellides

AN INTRODUCTION INTO TACTILE PROVISION

I HISTORY

In the field of special (cultural and recreational) provision for visually handicapped people, the past 25 years have seen the rise of tactile galleries and creative workshops, and to a limited extent the development of summer schools. Our small enquiry has enabled us to estimate the total number of tactile exhibitions held over the past two decades throughout the world to perhaps 300-400 or list about 50 places which advertise some form of permanent tactile provision ranging from a single item to an entire collection, and to read about 30 workshops in the United States and in Britain which take the blind person's needs for creative activity into account.*

Tactile collections are in no way new. In the eighteenth century the blind Melanie de Salignac possessed geographical tactile maps in which the parallels and meridians were of brass wire. The boundaries of kingdoms and provinces were marked with silk or threads of varying thickness. The rivers and mountains were pinheads, large and small. The towns were blobs of sealing wax proportioned to their size.†

However, the 1950's initiate a qualitative change in provision which takes its meaning if put against the background of some 250 years western history which brought the recognition of the blind person's equal intellectual capacities and an increased awareness of the need to further this potential in evermore individualised ways.

* These figures are illustrative and do not include an underdetermined, but relatively high number of one-off informal handling sessions. Information in this field is patchy and does not circulate well. The best source of information in this country is the Reference Library of the Royal National Institute for the Blind, London.

† Ross. Journey into Light. p.82-83.

Denis Diderot's "Letter on the blind for the use of those who can see" (1749) is considered the first written landmark in this slow and still ongoing process. To the empiricist philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the blind person was an ideal subject matter for theoretical speculation on the origin of knowledge. In this respect Diderot's novelty lay in a wider practical concern for the lifestyle of the blind, a broader approach ultimately conducive to social change. By drawing parallels between the sense of sight and touch for the reading of conventional signs, Diderot anticipates the sign languages which only a few decades later were to revolutionise blind and deaf-dumb people's access to learning (e.g. the braille alphabet by Louis Braille, 18 , and the Abbe de l'Epee's sign language for the deaf-dumb, 17).

Prior to the establishment of the first school for the blind, founded by Valentin Haüy in Paris in 1784, opportunities of educational advancement for the blind were the exceptional case, conceivable only within a privileged, educated, prejudiceless and committed environment. Individual attempts to ease the blind person's social and cultural integration, such as the young Christopher Wren's invention of a pen for writing in relief, at Wadham College, Oxford,* appear throughout history and were not unusual for Renaissance thinking,# but they remain of limited impact on the general welfare of the blind and attitudes towards them until the invention of embossed writing.

Between 1784 and 1833 schools for the blind opened in more than a dozen western countries. By 1850 there were over 20 of them in Germany and in France, with a total number of about 2,000 pupils in each country. In the early schools emphasis lay on basic education and economic self-reliance through the teaching of handicrafts (in particular basket weaving) with a strong utilitarian stress on educating the blind to become useful members of the society.

* Batey. Oxford Gardens. p.47.

This philanthropic tradition of sheltered lives and utilitarian philosophy, ill adapted to the contemporary world, was still current in the 1950's. Attention has been drawn to its drawbacks from the point of view of social integration and the development of motor skills and creative skills, by authors such as Culsforth.*

Chapman has pointed out that the assessment of past failures and successes requires a case to case study, and mentions the innovative line taken by the blind founders of the present Royal National College for the Blind (Hereford, 1872), who encouraged roller skating, fencing and the riding of articulated bicycles (made for twelve!).#

By the end of the nineteenth century most schools for the blind had formed their own tactile collections, then recognised as an indispensable part of the teaching process for blind children. Teaching in schools for the blind has been revolutionised in recent days by the Minolta copier, which instantly translates drawings into raised line figures. The earliest recorded museum collection for the blind is due to Johann Wilhelm Klein (Vienna, in the first years of the nineteenth century) and contained over 5,000 specimens devoted to all phases of education and history.+

* Culsforth. The Blind in School and Society.

Chapman. Visually Handicapped Children and Young People. p.31.

+ Switzer. The Enjoyment of the Arts, Another Aspect of Rehabilitation.

2. II PIONEERS

Until the 1950's tactile collections existed almost solely for didactic purposes. They were not designed as a source of tactile pleasure nor were they intended to encourage aesthetic experience in the broad sense. The widespread and institutionalised belief that beauty could only be reached through the visual sense, grounded in assumptions of Greek metaphysics, the priority always given to education primarily as the acquisition of knowledge and most civilisation's uneasy relationship to the tactual sense partly explain the long life of this omission.

In contrast to most of their predecessors, tactile collections after the 1950's were made accessible to all age groups in a context in which education and recreation could go hand in hand.

Some of today's key words are "tactuality is actuality" (Eaton, 1959), "beauty for the sighted and the blind" (Eaton, 1959), "please touch" (British Museum, etc.), "artshare" (Nottingham, 198), "artaccessibility" (Carnegie Council "Arts for Disabled People", 1986), "arts for everyone" (Anne Pearson 1985), "cultural tourism for the blind too" (Weisen, 1985), "arts as a means of personality growth and harmonious social integration" (Human Rights Declaration, 1948, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation 1984), "the right to independent access to the arts, culture and heritage", (the Attenborough Report, 1985).

The strongest impetus to the contemporary movement of tactile galleries came from two American pioneering projects. These are Allen H. Eaton's "Collection of Objects of Beauty for the Sighted and the Blind" (1959) and Charles W. Stanford's "Mary Duke Biddle Gallery for the Blind" (1966), now rebaptised Mary Duke Biddle Educational Gallery.

In his book "Beauty for the Sighted and the blind" Eaton describes a collection of small size manmade and natural objects of pleasant form, texture and colour. Extreme care had been given to create a collection offering the widest possible range of experiences, tactile, cultural, emotional, and

The 41 manmade exhibits were made of no less than 20 different materials, among them wood was well represented with 12 species. From a Stone Age hand tool to a Finnish glassbowl of the 1950's, they covered a timespan of over 6,000 years, with work from every continent: a pure crystal sphere, a Pomo Indian ceremonial basket pleasant to hold in the hands, of fine weaving texture inside and smooth, soft bird feathers on the outside, and Toscanini's baton will stand as illustrations for Eaton's highly refined tactile sensitivity.

Clearly many of Eaton's pleasure-giving exhibits could only be fully appreciated through touch. Aesthetic pleasure could be obtained from high tactile variety, the recognition of materials, and from the story telling potential of each of the objects, their use in their cultural context and the circumstances and fascinating material aspects of their making.

Eaton's entire approach is grounded in the belief that the common experience of beauty enhances the quality of communication between individuals. It opens up a number of avenues which further the blind person's harmonious social interaction, and anticipates a wealth of largely unexplored multisensory ways towards broader appreciation of the arts and the environment among sighted and blind people.

As most of Eaton's collection belongs to the world of handicrafts, traditionally not labelled as "art", his use of terms such as "aesthetic experience" could be criticised for unscholarly treatment. However, narrow definitions of art have been challenged right through this century, and the resulting plurality, incompatibility, overlapping and vagueness of terminologies has largely been accepted as the price to pay for increased creative freedom.

It is Eaton's merit to have made the individual and his manifold responses to beauty the centre of his thought, rather than to propose a normative approach.

"..... the experience of beauty is a response
 to the whole intellectual and emotional being,
 it is a response to the full personality."(7)

As a masterpiece of enlightened "non-professional" work, Eaton's undertaking, holistic in scope, is infused with radiating qualities such as a loving care for human well being, a thorough capacity for the discovery and enjoyment of beauty, and a thoughtful sensitivity for the sum of details that make up all the difference and winning grace in communication. His work provides a lasting inspirational ground for any venture in which "intangibles" such as beauty and the human factor are of prime importance.

The small size of Eaton's exhibits makes them ideal for handling, carrying and holding and allows a quick tactile understanding of their totality. The limited economic value of the items, whose qualities are largely the result of careful selection, solves a number of conservation problems proper to "please touch" museum exhibits. To a certain extent they are replaceable, perhaps not as individual works but as illustrations of the unlimited reservoir of natural and manmade objects of beauty which they display.

On the other hand, such collections will in many cases be unsuitable for open museum display, where no special security provision is taken against risk of intentful damage. They fulfil their purpose ideally in the presence of a well informed commentator with high communication skills. Their potential for personalised and intimate discovery is best brought about in handling sessions for small groups of people (say 12 and less, although Eaton has arranged handling sessions for groups of 20).

(7) Eaton. Beauty for the Sighted and the Blind.

Eaton's unconventional approach to tactile (exhibition) provision, together with its special requirements (handling sessions, commentators, staff skilled in the acquisition and selection of "objects of beauty") have regrettably limited the impact of his thought, which has remained virtually unknown in Europe. Despite their unquestionable contemporary appeal and with a few noteworthy exceptions, Eaton's ideals have never been fully implemented within the frame of permanent museum provision.

Eaton's book was read by Charles W. Stanford, curator of the North Carolina Museum of Art. In 1962 he set out to determine "if the blind could be taught a comprehensive survey of art history through the handling of original objects".(8) The purpose of his pilot classes was "to study not only the object, but also to correlate the object with its epoch and place in man's development of culture".

Four years later the museum opened the first permanent tactile gallery. Since 40-50 tactile galleries or "tactile corners" have opened throughout the world, but none has developed a vitality nearly as impressive as that of the Mary Duke Biddle Gallery which organised 26 exhibitions in only six years, (roughly twice as many as the total number of tactile exhibitions in Britain over a similar time period). The mainstream of tactile exhibitions elsewhere have found a natural natural source of inspiration in Stanford's pioneering venture, with regard to the subjects of exhibitions, the design of exhibition space and presentational methods.

The works of art, always original, including Degas, Rodin and Maillol, were selected with

"aesthetic, intellectual and tactile considerations in mind".*

(8) Stanford. Planning and Operation of Mary Duke Biddle Gallery for the Blind. ch.I,p.1.

* Stanford, op. cit. p. 6.

Much consideration was given

"to introduce and familiarise the young students with their present environment through the expressive creativity of contemporary artists".(9)

The overall purpose was recognised to be the integration of visually handicapped people into sighted society.

Thus no area of past or living culture and daily life, as expressed through art, was excluded from exhibition programmes. A high level of community involvement was reached in exhibitions such as "Glass" (1970), with exhibits collected from more than 45 individuals throughout the state of North Carolina and the "School of Design Students' Projects" (1971). These end of term projects were specifically geared to tactual understanding and clearly provided the students with new creative stimuli. Two exhibitions, "Post Figures" (1967) and "Joe Brown, The World of Sport" (1972) were geared towards increased body awareness. An exhibition such as "Kinetic Art" (1969) well illustrates the potential of contemporary art forms for the rich experience of sound and infinite variety of materials.

III PRESENT DAY ISSUES

Most tactile exhibitions of the past 25 years have combined aesthetic, intellectual and tactile qualities in varying degrees. The majority of exhibitions of which we know have stressed the intellectual (or cultural) aspect most strongly. Aesthetic considerations play a prime role in arts exhibitions, such as "Sculpture for the Blind" (Tate Gallery, 1976) and "Mit den Händen sehen" (Seeing Fingers, Marburg, 1980).

The Mary Duke Biddle Gallery, Marburg and the British Museum are examples of maximum care given to a variety of materials, textures and surfaces (more than 20 materials for the 47 exhibits of the Marburg catalogue, about 10 varieties of stone for 20 exhibits at the British Museum 1983 and 1986). Although a large amount of tactile pleasure can be derived from sculptures which form the majority of all tactile exhibits, and in which the visual aspects dominate, it must be emphasised that the purely tactile qualities of exhibits have hardly ever been given the place they deserve in tactile provision.

Our tactual vocabulary is remarkably underdeveloped, and it would usually do to say that blind people like smooth, polished and rounded surfaces but tactile aesthetics are not confined to these sensations alone. Even a single experience blindfolded in an art gallery, or the occasional training of the tactile sense, and the listening to the likings of visually handicapped people teaches us about a much higher richness of the pleasure giving aspects of materials.

Later generations will recognise in us a generation which has eventually removed the "do not touch taboo", but which ironically has failed to invent tactuality. Only in a few cases has tactile pleasure inspired a theme for an entire tactile exhibition. It is a valid question to wonder how much obstinate tactile atrophy makes us lose out in our day to day relationship with the environment.

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